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Chair

The Honourable MaryAnn Mihychuk

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• (0845)

[English]

The Chair (Hon. MaryAnn Mihychuk (Kildonan—St. Paul, Lib.)): Good morning, everybody. Welcome to the Standing Committee on Indigenous and Northern Affairs of the Parliament of Canada. We are doing a study on capacity-building and the retention of talent on reserves.

Today we are pleased to have with us the Whitecap Dakota First Nation and Saskatoon Public Schools in that area.

Here in Ottawa, we go through a process of recognizing a piece of truth and reconciliation. The fact is that the Parliament Buildings are actually on the unceded territory of the Algonquin people.

Let me just frame this a bit. You normally would get up to 10 minutes to do your presentation. After that the other presenters will get 10 minutes, and then we'll do rounds of questions from the members of Parliament.

I'll turn it over to Chief Darcy Bear.

Chief Darcy M. Bear (Whitecap Dakota First Nation): Good morning.

First of all, when you say 10 minutes, is that 10 minutes for me and 10 minutes for Ray? Or is that five and five?

The Chair: I see that we're negotiating already.

Voices: Oh, oh!

The Chair: No.

Chief Darcy M. Bear: It's five?

The Chair: Yes, it's 10 minutes in total.

Chief Darcy M. Bear: Okay. I just wanted to make sure.

First of all, good morning to everyone in Ottawa. We're here to talk about our alliance agreement that we have with the Saskatoon Public Schools division.

To put everything in context, Whitecap is located 20 minutes south of the city of Saskatoon. We've been in that location since 1879. Our chief, Whitecap, is recognized as one of the founding fathers of the City of Saskatoon. He had a meeting with a fellow by the name of John Lake back in 1882. Also, as Dakota people, we are allies of the British Crown and fought in both the American Revolution and the War of 1812, which was very significant and helped to make our country a nation. I always say that if we had lost

that war, we'd have a U.S. flag over the nation and we'd have Donald Trump running around here, but we don't.

We have a proud history, and our ancestors always worked in partnership. Indeed, the word "Dakota" means "ally". Since the sixties, our community has been engaged with the Saskatoon Public Schools division as far as our students—

The Chair: Chief Bear, I'm sorry. I think I misled you. In fact, I didn't realize that the gentleman beside you was from the board of Saskatoon Public Schools. In reality, if you wanted to take the full 20 minutes, that's up to you guys. You have some latitude on that.

Chief Darcy M. Bear: Okay. Was I on mute this whole time?

The Chair: No, no. We've heard you. I'm so sorry.

Chief Darcy M. Bear: Okay. I thought—

Mr. Mike Bossio (Hastings—Lennox and Addington, Lib.): We're going to start you over—

Chief Darcy M. Bear: —I'd have to start all over again here.

Voices: Oh, oh!

The Chair: No. I'm sorry for interrupting. Please go ahead.

Chief Darcy M. Bear: Since the 1960s, our community members have attended Saskatoon Public Schools division schools. I was raised in my community in Whitecap and went to school in the community until grade 5. Then from grade 6 to 12 we were bused into Saskatoon, and so I'm a graduate of the Saskatoon Public Schools division.

Back in 1994, I was elected chief, and then I approached the Saskatoon Public Schools division, a gentleman by the name of George Rathwell, who was a vice-principal of one of the schools, about looking at how we could work together to look at our curriculum and make sure the transition from Whitecap to Saskatoon was a smooth one for our students. That in a sense evolved to what we call today an alliance agreement on education.

Now we are part of the Saskatoon Public Schools division. We do still operate a school in our community. I will get into how our partnership works.

With our partnership, we have a joint governance committee, a joint operations committee. All our teaching staff are employees of the Saskatoon Public Schools division, so we get the certified teachers in the community. We have access to all of the resource materials of the Saskatoon Public Schools division, professional development, sector level services, and are part of ward 7 as well. It has been a really good partnership. Ray will probably get into some of the outcomes when he speaks.

Our agreement was considered a pilot project by the federal government. It's now in its sixth year of operation. It was considered a pilot agreement back when we signed the official agreement. It ended the education disparity for us, because in the past our community schools were getting about two-thirds of what provincial schools were getting as far as tuition goes, but we weren't getting a lot of supports. Since we've entered into this partnership, we have addressed a lot of the funding issues and ended the education disparity in Whitecap. It has been very positive for our community and our students.

We also negotiated some capital with the partnership with the federal government. We renovated our existing school, which was built back in 1996, so it met with Saskatoon Public Schools division facility standards. We also added an addition, and held discussions with our community members because our school went from pre K to 6, but our community members, parents and caregivers wanted our children to integrate into the Saskatoon Public Schools division earlier. Now our school currently goes from pre K to 4, and our grade 5 to 12s are bused in.

We looked at our grades 5 to 8 students. They are in three different schools in Saskatoon. They couldn't accommodate all of them. Then a new community just about 20 minutes from us was building a brand new school with Saskatoon Public Schools division, so we wanted to be a part of that. We represented about 10% of the student body. It's about a \$27 million build, so we lobbied the federal government to put \$2.7 million into that school on our behalf. Now that's the new home school for our grades 5 to 8.

The Saskatoon Public Schools division embraced it. They even named the school Chief Whitecap School, recognizing Chief Whitecap as one of the founding fathers. That's one of the reasons why. Also if you walk into the school, there's a culture room. We have elders there every day. There's smudging every day for our students. This is a public school; it's not a segregated school just for Whitecap students. It's open to everyone.

All the classrooms inside the school are bilingual. They are English and Dakota. They fly the Whitecap flag as well outside the school. It has been a great partnership to date. Our high school students attend Aden Bowman, and Walter Murray in Saskatoon as well.

The other thing we did out of our partnership is that we invested in an early learning centre. We used to operate a 20-seat day care, but we're one of the members that have signed on to the framework agreement on first nation land management and eliminated 25% of the Indian Act, allowing us to self govern our lands. It has enabled us to go through land use planning, zoning, development standards, infrastructure investment and taxation regimes. It opened our doors

for business. We have now gone from a 70% unemployment rate down to a 5% unemployment rate.

That said, we have over 600 jobs in our community. We looked at our 20-seat day care and looked at expanding it and then building a brand new facility, a 56-seat early learning centre that's all based on literacy, culture and language. It was a partnership between the federal government, Whitecap and the province, and of course working with the Saskatoon Public Schools and early learning centres they operate. It's now in operation. As of this year, we have another \$62 million of projects on the books and another 225 jobs coming to our community next year.

• (0850)

Our whole focus is on retention, as studies have shown that, with learning and literacy at an early age, children stay in school and finish their grade 12. That creates another impact on Whitecap where, because our focus is on retention, we get a lot of grade 12 graduates. They want to get post-secondary education, but once again, the Indigenous Services Canada program is capped. However, because Whitecap generates its own source of revenue, we top that up so that our students don't fall through the cracks, and they do get to attend a post-secondary institution.

The current post-secondary program is a flexible transfer. First nations that don't even have post-secondary students can use it for other expenditures, so it's not fair to those students who actually want to go to school. We're hoping that the federal government will review this and start releasing post-secondary funding based on actuals, on demands. That way the students are not the ones who get left behind. It's not a flexible transfer anymore, but it should be a transfer that is based on actuals and on results.

I'll leave it at that. I'll turn it over to Ray.

• (0855)

Mr. Ray Morrison (Chair of the Board of Trustees, Saskatoon Public Schools): Thank you, Chief.

Thank you to the committee for the invitation and the opportunity to speak about our alliance with Whitecap. In particular, thank you to the clerk for allowing us to set this up via video conference. Given people's schedules, it's always difficult.

I always appreciate following Chief Bear because he usually says most of what I need to say, so it makes it easier.

As a little bit of history on Saskatoon Public Schools, we've been around since 1864, so we've been around this part of the country for quite a while. We are the largest school division in the province of Saskatchewan. Our first nations, Inuit and Métis student population hovers in the 16% to 22%, depending on the year and the time of year and enrolment. We have a significant indigenous student population, which is a big part of the work we do.

We also have two additional associate schools, a Muslim school and a Christian school, that are both faith-based. They operate inside of Saskatoon Public Schools, but they have some level of independence.

In particular, I'll raise a few points about our partnership with Whitecap. I don't think we need to go into details about how things work. I look forward to questions on some of those things.

Chief Bear talked about the evolution of this partnership. It has evolved over about 24 or 25 years now. The partnership works because of relationships we've built, not necessarily because of the documents that are required. That's been a big part of how we've grown into what we are today.

One key to our success to this point has been staying focused on what's best for students when we're at the table to discuss things. That's always our priority.

Secondly, we respect the jurisdictions of both parties. We operate in different environments, so I've learned much about first nations' funding in education, and I think the chief and his staff have learned a lot about provincial funding. We've built an agreement that has been signed between Whitecap and Saskatoon Public Schools, but the federal and provincial governments were included as part of those negotiations, and it's been an interesting journey along the way.

We continue to hope that as a part of Saskatoon Public Schools' response to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission we are building bridges, and that in the long term, as Chief Bear outlined before, some of the programming and what we've done in some of our schools will lead to more success for indigenous students, better graduation rates and stronger success rates in the future.

The one thing the chief didn't mention about Chief Whitecap School is that as you enter the school, it very much reflects the Whitecap Dakota First Nation. The doors on all of the classrooms have the names of the room in English and in Dakota. We're trying to take this to a level that we haven't done in any other facility. We have a Cree immersion program at another school, so we have much going on. But in this case, our relationship with Whitecap has allowed us to really focus on what we think is best for the students in the long term.

I think I will leave it at that, Chief, and we can look for—

The Chief just reminded me to speak to outcomes. I apologize for that.

We've seen a couple of things in the short term. In 2014, about 40% of the students in grades 1 to 4 in Whitecap were meeting the expected reading levels for that age group. In 2017, which is the last year we have numbers for right now, we've moved that bar to 80%. Just by concentrating on what's important to those students and working with Whitecap, we've made a difference already.

As we look forward to high school graduation rates, it's early years for us. As a person who's been involved in K-to-12 education for more than two decades now, I can say that it will be a generational outcome. We'll see the impact of the work we're doing now in 10 or 12 or 13 years, but we will be following the success of those students as they work their way through the education system on to graduation, and hopefully on into society.

• (0900)

Thank you. I'll leave it at that.

The Chair: All right. Very good.

We're going to start the questioning, and we begin with MP Yves Robillard.

This is probably going to be in French, so I believe that you'll have translation services.

Mr. Ray Morrison: Okay.

The Chair: Yves.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yves Robillard (Marc-Aurèle-Fortin, Lib.): Thank you.

My thanks to our guests for their testimony.

Witnesses at this committee have spoken about the difficulties many northern, remote and isolated communities face in attracting and retaining teachers and health care professionals. The remoteness aside, several factors present challenges to talent retention in First Nations communities, including lower salary grids and the lack of proper housing on reserves.

In your view, what is the main barrier to talent retention in indigenous communities?

[*English*]

Chief Darcy M. Bear: I think the biggest challenge would be exactly what you said. It is the salary levels, not having a salary grid, etc., and not paying teachers and giving them job security.

I know that in the past for a Whitecap—and we're not in the north, but we're 20 minutes from an urban centre—when we weren't part of Saskatoon Public Schools division, it was difficult for us to attract the best teachers. It's human nature to look at job security, and when they don't have job security, they're not going to want to come to teach in our communities.

Since we've now partnered with Saskatoon Public Schools division and our teachers are employees of the division through our agreement, we can get some of the best accredited teaching staff coming from the Saskatoon Public Schools division. They have always wanted to come to work in our community, but we didn't have the same pay grid as Saskatoon Public Schools. A lot of times communities, because of the inadequate funding, will try to get first-year and second-year teachers because they're at the lower end of the grid. In this case, we don't have to do that anymore because we have the average...and we can get the best teachers coming out.

Getting back to the question, though, as far as the northern communities, it's definitely going to be funding issues, housing issues. There are going to be infrastructure issues as well.

We lived beside Saskatoon before it was a city. We were there in 1879. The meeting of Chief Whitecap and John Lake was in 1882.

However, even when I was growing up in my community, we didn't have any modern infrastructure. We used to have to haul water to our houses. We used to chop wood to heat our homes. I'm not a pioneer, but this is the way we were raised. There was no modern infrastructure; there were no opportunities. There were no recreation facilities. Our schools never met any of the facility standards that a public school division would have.

You can see the challenges that my community faced, but I can't imagine what the communities in the north are facing in regard to trying to retain and recruit indigenous teachers, especially when there is a shortage of housing. You could imagine that if they did build housing for teachers and yet you have a community that has overcrowding and a housing shortage, it never looks like a popular move inside the community.

A lot of our first nations have no choice. The limited housing they do have, they have to give to their membership. It would be difficult to have any housing for staff, but it's something that should certainly be considered in the future.

Again, you have to look at the infrastructure that goes with it and about having some kind of standard in regard to salaries. You can't have an expectation that every teacher coming into a northern community is going to be a first-year or second-year teacher. If you want to get some of the best, then you have to invest in those resources.

Ray can maybe add on to some of the teaching component of our staff.

• (0905)

Mr. Ray Morrison: Chief Bear raised some good points.

One of the things we've found is that we now have staff who want to teach on the first nation at Charles Red Hawk School, because they know they have, what I would call, a safety net to go back to in the public school system.

You raised a very interesting and complex question.

About two years ago, I chaired a panel for the Government of Saskatchewan and toured the province studying governance and education. We spent a significant amount of time in the north talking with communities up there about those very issues.

On another front, a little unrelated to Whitecap, as a school division, I speak to my peers across the north on a regular basis. We're starting to explore ways to deal with that very issue: Are there ways we can create exchange programs? Teachers who teach in the city could spend a term or a year in the north learning about the cultures in those communities, know they have a place to come back to, and study the implications of what that means on those communities in the north.

We're starting down a path to explore some of those opportunities. I wish I had the silver-bullet answer that would solve those problems, but, unfortunately, I don't.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yves Robillard: Thank you.

What measures should the federal government take to remove the barriers to attracting and retaining professionals in indigenous communities, such as the lack of proper housing on reserves?

[*English*]

Chief Darcy M. Bear: I have yet to see the housing crisis resolved. It's unresolved, I would say. Even in my community, we have a waiting list. I have about 100 of my members who are waiting for houses.

We also have a lot of employees, and even our employees want to reside in our community. We have the only provincial housing project on reserve in Saskatchewan because we have a land tenure system. We have legally surveyed lots, so we have a partnership with Saskatchewan Housing Corporation to create some affordable housing for employees. We have about 34 units for employees, but we have about another 90 employees who would like to reside in our community.

Housing has always been a challenge, and I think it will continue to be a challenge. Even this year alone, CMHC is reducing its budget by 20% to 30%, and that's going to impact all of our communities across Canada. There has been a lack of investment in housing, and I think that needs to be addressed.

The other thing is that there has not been one subdivision development in Saskatchewan for the last decade. I talked to the regional director general, and there are never any resources for subdivision development. Right now we need to build another subdivision, but again, there are no resources for planning and design.

If you could solve that problem for us, that would be great, because it's certainly a challenge that is going to come down to resources.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yves Robillard: It is certainly not easy. My congratulations for the efforts you are making.

I may ask more questions a little later, if we have any time left.

Thank you.

[*English*]

The Chair: We now move to MP Kevin Waugh.

Mr. Kevin Waugh (Saskatoon—Grasswood, CPC): Thank you to both of you for getting up at early dawn in Saskatoon.

By way of full disclosure, I was on the board when this agreement was made between Whitecap and Saskatoon Public Schools. It was a great agreement, but as usual when you're dealing with the federal government and provincial bodies, there was a lot of apprehension. Maybe just talk about that.

At the time the minister was John Duncan. It took several years to get this agreement. What were the obstacles to this agreement? When you're dealing with schools on reserve, as you know, Darcy, everybody wants to keep their money, to keep their education and to keep their culture. This one was a unique situation between you and Saskatoon Public Schools. Maybe just talk about that, if you don't mind.

Chief Darcy M. Bear: I think there is definitely a concern on the part of the provincial government and the Saskatoon Public Schools division. There is a concern about what this agreement is going to mean to the amount of resources that the Saskatoon Public Schools division receives from the province. Is Whitecap going to be tapping into that? We had indicated that would not be the case. What we were looking at doing was making sure that we paid our way and that, if there were a tuition rate for our grade 5 to 12 students to attend the Saskatoon Public Schools division schools, it would be there and that any resources we require for our grades pre-K to 4 in Whitecap would be there.

We would look at an actual agreement, not an MOU, but an alliance agreement and would make sure that Whitecap still had some independence concerning controls, so we created the joint governance committee and joint operations committee. Again, because we said that we would allow the provincial Education Act to apply to Whitecap lands, if Whitecap went down the path of self-government and eventually created a Whitecap education act, its education act would meet or exceed the provincial act and the Saskatoon Public Schools division would follow that. That was agreed upon.

For the agreement to go forward, we also had to look at Whitecap becoming part of ward 7 so that the Saskatoon Public Schools division could administer our on-reserve school pre-K to 4, but, again, Whitecap still has a hand in regard to the governance committee and operations committee, so our community still has a say.

We also get to vote in the elections for the ward 7 trustee in Saskatoon. Again, we had to allow for the early learning centre, and we met with the provincial minister responsible back then, Minister Don Morgan. We also had to have the provincial child care regulations apply to Whitecap lands for that to happen.

There were some concessions made, but we never gave up any jurisdiction. At the end of the day, it's about our children and the best education they could receive going forward. We want them to stay in school and finish their education, get their grade 12. In Saskatchewan alone, through boomers retiring, there are going to be another 86,000 jobs opening up here.

We have a young indigenous population, but we need to continue to work together to find ways to improve our education systems and not be afraid to partner. We partner with one of the largest school divisions in the province, and yet today, for example, the federal government just announced that there will be \$1,500 per student for language and culture. They're saying that will apply only to on reserve, so they're saying that's only good for the grades pre-K to 4. Our grades 5 to 8 who go to the Chief Whitecap School operated by Saskatoon Public Schools get zero, yet we have a language and cultural programs being delivered there.

These children wake up every morning in Whitecap. We strategically made a decision to invest in a grade 5-to-8 school 20 minutes away, so the funding should flow with those children, but the bureaucrats don't see that. They don't look at our agreement as a regional education authority, because it's better than the regional education authority.

• (0910)

Mr. Kevin Waugh: Yes.

Chief Darcy M. Bear: All of the capacity is there already, yet all the regional education authorities that Indigenous Services Canada is promoting are struggling to find capacity.

How are we going to accredit our teachers when we don't want to use the provincial accreditation and all that? We're not saying that. We're saying that we want the best teachers. We're fine with provincial accreditation and making sure that teachers who are coming out to our community have all of the accreditation they need and that they're the best there for our children.

Mr. Kevin Waugh: You're going to take my seven minutes up before I get to my second question.

We heard from Manitoba that they're getting between \$18,000 and \$20,000 per student on reserve. What are you getting? I know that Saskatoon Public Schools provincially, Ray, is nowhere close to \$18,000 per student. It was probably \$9,000 or \$10,000 when I left, if they were lucky.

What are you getting, Darcy, from K to 4 on reserve from the federal government per student?

Chief Darcy M. Bear: I believe it's not as good as what Manitoba is getting, so thanks for that. It's about \$14,000 to \$16,000 per student.

Mr. Kevin Waugh: I heard Punnichy is getting \$6,000. We have seen—and I have talked to so many people in my province—that it varies. The federal government right now is picking winners and losers. The winners right now appear to be Manitoba, and they are short-changed in my province, and I've talked to many school divisions on reserve. They're nowhere close to \$18,000 per student.

Ray, when we did the agreement, the number one issue was graduation rates, and it still is. I am so proud of your coming forth today with the data comparing 2014 and 2017.

Maybe talk about the capacity that your school division had to help out Whitecap. That's why the agreement has been so successful to date.

Mr. Ray Morrison: I will do my best, Kevin.

Just as a side note, we're getting less per student today than when you were on the board, so maybe you should come back. I'm not sure....

Mr. Kevin Waugh: You're right.

Mr. Ray Morrison: You know, with regard to Saskatoon Public Schools' student success rates, the provincial benchmark is graduation from grade 12 within three years, but we tend to take a little broader look at that. We're trying to look at success in the community post-high school, whether it's in the workforce, on to post-secondary education or whatever it is. We've been focused on that, I think, for a number of years now. We've put a significant amount of time, effort and resources into the indigenous file in particular because we have a significant indigenous student population. We are starting to see better success in graduation rates simply by focusing on—I don't want to say their needs—asking those students what it would take to make them graduate or to help them be successful as they move through elementary school and on through high school.

We're a part of several programs—Following Their Voices and others—where we get that student input and actually talk to them about what they need and what we can do to help them be successful in school. It's starting to pay dividends. We're starting to see our on-time graduation rate, which is three years from grade 10 to grade 12, increase over the past three or four years. As we look at those students who take four or five years to graduate, the numbers have increased dramatically. We're starting to see significant success, over time, in graduation rates. It's being driven by paying attention to those students who need, and to what it is that they need to be successful in school.

The education system, certainly, as you know, has been around since the post-industrial revolution, and we still sort kids by age, which sometimes doesn't work. We're trying to take a little more of a holistic view as to what those students need to be successful. We're starting to see those dividends pay off.

● (0915)

Mr. Kevin Waugh: Good for you.

That's it, seven minutes.

The Chair: Okay—a little bit over.

We now go to MP Rachel Blaney.

Ms. Rachel Blaney (North Island—Powell River, NDP): Thank you so much for being here today. I really enjoyed your presentation.

One thing I found most interesting was that you talked about having language classes and cultural activities being open to all children. I remember when my kids were in school. Whenever they would go to learn their language, they were always taken off by themselves with the other kids from the reserve to go learn the language, and then they were sent back to the class. That always frustrated me because I think that one thing that we need to see is our young people proud, sharing their culture and sharing their language.

I'm just wondering if you could speak about what benefits you are seeing from allowing the indigenous community to flourish, but also of engaging the other communities to engage with that positive aspect.

Mr. Ray Morrison: I'll maybe speak to that from two perspectives. First is the work that's going on at Chief Whitecap School. Second, we have another school, Confederation Park School, that has a Cree immersion program.

Chief Whitecap School, as Chief Bear said, is in a community in the south end of Saskatoon. It is a very diverse, multicultural community. As we moved into this, we consulted with the community. We would get them together for meetings to talk about programming, what we were thinking about and how they would respond. To the surprise of some people, we found that the community was genuinely interested in learning about the history and culture of Whitecap. Because many of the students in that community come from other countries and other cultures, they are very much open to learning about this culture and the history of Canada, and to engaging in other languages and learning other traditions.

In our Cree immersion program, we found the same. That program is open to all students. There are a significant number of students from all kinds of backgrounds who are in that program, wanting to learn Cree.

What we've found is that, over time, we're building stronger, more open, more understanding communities, as well as students. If you walk into the classroom, those students—this may come across as flippant, but please don't take it that way—really don't care who's who in the room. They are all there to get educated. They all know each other. They all spend time with each other in school and outside of school. From what we've seen, it's been very beneficial.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Perfect.

● (0920)

Chief Darcy M. Bear: Yes, it's been a positive experience for our students from our community. Like I said, there's also a cultural room there, and even a lot of new Canadians are going in and smudging as well with our students. It's very open.

Mr. Ray Morrison: Yes.

Chief Darcy M. Bear: Our elders are there every day, and for the students coming from Whitecap it makes them feel at home. As you walk up, the Whitecap flag is flying outside the school as well. On the architectural side of things, a lot of the elements—even the landscaping, with trees and things that grew in Whitecap and all that—just make them feel at home. It's been a positive experience.

For language and culture, as I mentioned earlier, it would be great to see the funding that's been identified at \$1,500 per student flow with these children in Chief Whitecap School, because the school division is putting on the programming but the funding's not flowing with it. That's unfortunate.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Yes, I think that's a really important point.

I was asked earlier about attracting and retaining good teachers and health care professionals on reserve. Of course, we've heard from multiple witnesses that the challenge is that you have unstable contracts, lower-paying jobs, and that it's really hard to recruit and retain them. It's this cycle that I see happening in so many communities across Canada of how do you build your economy and that strength if you keep having a changeover in staff and doing all that work?

Based on what you said, Chief Bear, you have seen the unemployment rate go down dramatically within your community. Could you speak to that and how working in this partnership has really been able to push those things forward?

Chief Darcy M. Bear: I think, when you're talking about the economy, you basically have to look at the Indian Act. The Indian Act was never created for us to be part of the economy.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: That's right.

Chief Darcy M. Bear: It was created to keep us out of sight and out of mind. They put us on these small little tracts of land called reservations. I was raised by my grandparents. My grandfather, as a young man, if he wanted to leave Whitecap to get supplies, had to get a pass. If he wanted to sell his livestock, he had to get a permit from the Indian agent. If he wanted to sell a crop, he had to get a permit from the Indian agent. So, here we were, living in a so-called free country under dictatorship rule, which was the Indian agent. We didn't have the same opportunities as other jurisdictions.

Every other jurisdiction surrounding Whitecap or any of our first nation communities in Canada had the opportunity to invest in infrastructure, develop its economy and create jobs, opportunities and even hope. Then you add insult to injury with residential schools where they wanted to take the Indian out of the Indian, and they started moving all the youth. Parents didn't even see their children for 10 months of the year. Sadly, sometimes some of those children passed away during the school year and the parents weren't told about it until the end of the school year. So, the parenting skills.... You know, you talk about the residential schools taking away culture, language, pride, identity and even the ability to parent. My mother went to a residential school and, hence, she never did raise me. I was raised by my grandparents. So, it's been difficult.

That said, when we first started looking at economic development, we started saying that, as indigenous people, we need to take our rightful place and be a part of the economy. How can we get there? The Indian Act is very restrictive. If we want to, say, lease a piece of our land, we would have to do a land designation, a land surrender, and then have the minister sign off on the lease. That takes three years. By that time, the window of opportunity is gone; the business is going to move away.

When 14 first nations, including Muskoday from Saskatchewan, were lobbying the federal government to create the Framework Agreement on First Nation Land Management, which was a government-to-government agreement, and to enable the first nations to self-govern their lands, once we heard about that we embraced it. We took that forward to our community, and back in 2004, we ratified our land code. Now we self-govern our lands. We eliminated 25% of the Indian Act.

That first nation land management initiative enabled our community to not just self-govern our lands, but to also do the land planning, zoning, and development standards, getting our lands ready for economic development and then opening our doors. Our first business was Dakota Dunes Golf Links, which opened back in 2005. The course itself was recognized by Golf Digest as one of the best new golf courses in Canada, ranked number 16 in the country and number one in Saskatchewan.

Then from there there was a casino in Saskatoon that was going to be built, but the citizens had a plebiscite. Whitecap was plan B, and it became plan A. Again, because we had our land code in place, we didn't have to go through that process, that three-year window. We actually gave Saskatchewan Indian Gaming Authority a lease

immediately. We can move at the speed of business, and that's very important. Now, of course, we also have a store, and we are in the first phase of our business park. We have a hotel under construction right now to add to the resort area. Then we're also bringing a Nordic spa to Saskatchewan. We'll start that project later this year, and we'll be opening up next year.

So, there are 225 more jobs coming, and there are 600 now. That was all driven by saying, "We want to be part of the economy. We need solutions, and we're not afraid to partner. We're not afraid to work alone." I think it's important to have allies out there. When you start looking at the opportunities.... We've always had a strong focus on education since I was elected back in 1994—this is my 25th year as chief—but just approaching the Saskatoon Public Schools and saying this is what we want to do.... Now we have it to an actual formal agreement and a real strong relationship. We're hopeful that, again, Indigenous Services Canada can look at our agreement and say, "This is beyond a regional education authority", because that's one of the things that it keeps throwing back at us: "Well, you don't qualify for this funding because you're not a regional education authority. You don't qualify for this because you're not a regional education authority." We're saying, "We have all the capacities and more of a regional educational authority, so when are you going to wake up?" That's one of the challenges that we're having with the bureaucrats.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you.

• (0925)

The Chair: That's interesting.

We now move to MP Mike Bossio.

I understand that we can share the time a little bit, Mike. I appreciate it.

Mr. Mike Bossio: Sure, if you like. Yes, absolutely. Do you want to go first? Go ahead.

The Chair: Okay. I get to ask you a couple of questions. One of the issues is this. The Government of Canada provides some financial assistance and there is Canada learning bond. Do you find that your community members have accessed that opportunity? It's worth, in total, \$2,000 per student.

Chief Darcy M. Bear: This is the first time I've ever heard of the Canada learning bond, honestly.

The Chair: Well, we had better check it out.

Then there's another program called the Canada student grant. Now, in this case it amounts to \$3,000 per year per student.

Chief Darcy M. Bear: It's the same thing; I've never heard of it.

The Chair: I think statistically we found that there was poor knowledge and take-up of the existing opportunities. It sounds like you're well ahead of many other communities that we've talked to. That might be of some assistance.

Tell me a little more about the transition. If you do send young people off to school, they go to post-secondary education. What is the retention like? Do they come back home or are they busy with their own careers elsewhere?

Chief Darcy M. Bear: I think we've been very successful as far as getting our students into post-secondary education is concerned.

Also, I think that Indigenous Services Canada has really focused a lot in the past on teachers and social workers. We've been saying that we have to get beyond that.

For example, I chair the Saskatchewan Indian Institute of Technologies, which has a business administration diploma program. One of the challenges that we had with our business administration program was that if students wanted to transfer to the College of Commerce, there was only an 80% credit transfer. But for a college in Alberta, it would be a 100% credit transfer. So, about six years ago I met with the dean of the College of Commerce at the University of Saskatchewan about how we could ensure that the business administration diploma program that SIIT was delivering could meet the full-credit transfer at the university. Both the university and the SIIT worked on it to make sure that our curriculum had all the prerequisites they required for a full 100% transfer. That has happened.

This is our fifth year now of that partnership. In my small community alone, just on the commerce side, we've had six commerce graduates, with about four going through this pathway. Again, they are pushing their business acumen. All these commerce graduates are women. They are all working in our community because we have all these business opportunities.

We're also now working with the College of Medicine. We have another meeting coming up on April 17 to start promoting the sciences. We also have a partnership with an engineering company called Allnorth. We had some discussion with the University of Waterloo and are hopefully looking at another way to start promoting engineering as well—all of these disciplines.

Of course, there's nothing wrong with the trades. That's the other thing we've been doing as well, promoting the trades. When we were building the casino a number of years ago—it was about a \$60-million facility—Saskatoon was booming back in those days. There was a lack of trades. A lot of the business communities said we would never be able to get the construction done on time or on budget. Once again, as chair of SIIT, we created a quick skills program, a construction careers program. If the subcontractors needed drywallers, electricians or plumbers, we would have a quick three-week skills program. They would take them on as apprentices. We ended up with over 45,000 first nation man-hours on the project. As well as being ahead of schedule, we were under budget as well.

We are promoting post-secondary education. When our students get there they are being successful.

The other thing that we've seen with the casino is that a lot of our people will start with dealing cards and all that. Then they'll say this isn't what they want to do for the rest of their lives. They will go back to school and get their grade 12. They are getting their post-secondary education. It's really good to see. A lot of mature students are graduating.

There are definitely needs, though, for student housing in the city. We've had that discussion as well, about student housing in Saskatoon, especially for a lot of single mothers. We talked about creating, at least on a pilot project, a 56-unit facility attached to an early learning centre for single mothers who are going to post-secondary school.

Hopefully we will get some traction with that concept with the federal government.

● (0930)

The Chair: Okay.

Mike's feeling like....

Mr. Mike Bossio: I would like to get one question in.

The Chair: Okay, go.

Mr. Mike Bossio: I had a whole bunch of them, but they're all gone now.

Going through this experience, what advice would you give to other indigenous communities that might be looking at considering a similar type of partnership?

As you've seen it evolve, what would you do differently if you had to do it again?

Chief Darcy M. Bear: First of all, I don't advise other first nations. I think they have their own autonomy to make their decisions.

The path we went down is a pathway that we chose as a community, through community consultation. We have a minimum of four community meetings every year to talk with our membership.

Even when we started talking about the partnership with Saskatoon Public Schools there were certainly concerns. How does language and culture fit into this? Are they going to recognize our language and culture? Are they going to work with us? Are we going to have some independence as far as selecting who the principal is, coming out to our school?

There were lots of questions from the community in that regard, but it was an open dialogue. Saskatoon Public Schools came to a lot of our meetings in the community with the parents and caregivers. The model we created is driven by our community. It's the direction they gave their leadership. Even when we were moving from pre-K to grade 6 towards pre-K to grade 4 about five or six years ago, that was another discussion we had to have with the parents. That's the direction they wanted to go with integration. As long as the new grade 5 to grade 8 school was going to be inclusive and have our language and culture, they were very open to it. Our partners were very open to it as well.

Communicating, I think, is very important because if the parents and the caregivers aren't on board, the partnership is not going to work. The partners also have to have respect for one another, and they have to trust one another as well. This whole partnership all began in 1994 over a cup of coffee, and today it's an actual alliance agreement. I think it's a great model, but again, I would never tell any of the first nations how to do their business.

Mr. Mike Bossio: The reason I asked is that there are some who are considering it, and of course, it's always good to look at the past experiences of other communities, right? I think anybody would want to take a look at that.

The Chair: Mike, you've run out of time.

Mr. Mike Bossio: We're out of time, okay.

Thank you both very much.

The Chair: I'm sorry. MP Bossio was very generous.

Now we'll probably wrap up with MP Cathy McLeod.

Mrs. Cathy McLeod (Kamloops—Thompson—Cariboo, CPC): There are about three lines of inquiry I was hoping to pursue in my five minutes. Two were around comments you made. You indicated that the money available through CMHC is going to be fall by about 20% to 30%. I know that the current government put billions into general revenue from CMHC, but I hadn't heard that they were reducing the available funding. Could you quickly share with me what's happening there?

Chief Darcy M. Bear: My community was told late last week that the CMHC budget, for Saskatchewan anyway, will be 20% to 30% less, so for the Saskatoon Tribal Council, which we're a part of, it's going to be a major reduction for housing.

The program itself has to expand. For our community, they're saying we're going to get 1.4 houses. What are those 1.4 houses going to do for a community with a waiting list of about 90 members? You have to remember, we have a unique challenge in Whitecap. We have over 600 jobs and another 225 coming. It's human nature to move towards opportunity, so a lot of our members want to move home.

It's no different from any small town where, if there are no opportunities, people move to the urban centres. The same thing happens with first nations, but when you actually have opportunity, people move to where there's opportunity. It's certainly a real concern for us as far as the CMHC 20% to 30% decrease is concerned. We've certainly been trying to get some meetings with them. I hope that I'll soon get a chance to go to Ottawa to have some discussions about how we can work together.

I did meet with our provincial minister, Paul Merriman, who has responsibility for Saskatchewan Housing Corporation. They look at Whitecap's challenge and think it's a good challenge where you actually have employment and you an opportunity to house people and have a job with that house. We're going to try to partner again on one other project with the province. We have one apartment project with them now. We hope to get a second one, but that's in early discussions.

• (0935)

Mrs. Cathy McLeod: Thank you.

I know that billions went from CMHC into general revenue, and to hear that they're cutting back without an indication there's going to be something replacing it, or some new program, is a concern.

The next thing I thought was very interesting was that you talked about your community's choosing to go only as high as grade 4 because they thought there was value in communities coming

together. This is one thing I struggle with. I completely appreciate the mistrust of indigenous communities across this country in the education system, due to an awful history with residential schools, etc. My children, of course, grew up in a small community and went to school side by side....

I thought there was great value in terms of going to the birthday parties and playing sports together and learning each other's culture and language. Although I understood it when a new school was built on reserve, there was also some regret, because I thought some things were lost in terms of being together, playing together and learning together.

Yours is the first community I've heard from that has made the choice that there is some value in going to school together.

Chief Darcy M. Bear: I think it stems from the long-standing relationship between the City of Saskatoon and Whitecap, going back to the meeting between John Lake and Chief Whitecap and to Chief Whitecap picking a second location for the City of Saskatoon during the Riel resistance. Chief Whitecap was charged with treason, and one of the local citizens from Saskatoon went to testify on his behalf. His last name was Willoughby. He actually spoke Dakota.

You have to remember that there was a pass-and-permit system. At one time, Whitecap was the only indigenous community that used to go Saskatoon on a regular basis when they got their passes, to go and get supplies, of course. They knew a lot of the locals and had good relationships. That was in the days when—for our community, anyway—there were no vehicles. For them to go to get supplies, they would have to go with a team of horses. It was a full day's trek. Some of the local stores had stables and would put them up for the night, and then they'd head back home with all their supplies. There's just this long-standing relationship.

Also, you talked about sports teams. I think that being part of a larger school division and having bigger classroom sizes gives our children the opportunity to be involved with sports. They've been able to be a part of Saskatoon minor hockey. Again, we've been working with the City of Saskatoon. At one time, we weren't part of Saskatoon minor hockey and had to play in rural Saskatchewan, but there was no actual permanent roadway to get to Dundurn, and we had to drive all the way around. Now, we're part of Saskatoon minor hockey.

I think there has been lots of opportunity, and again, this was driven by parents. Some of them actually started driving their children into Saskatoon to the school division, because there was more faith from the parents in the Saskatoon school division and what they were delivering. They had questions about our own school system. Now that Saskatoon Public Schools is actually managing and operating our school system, the confidence is there from all of our parents, because they want to see their children get a quality education.

The other thing is the transition from, say, grade 4 to grade 5. It's a smooth transition now, because they already know that they'll have kids from Chief Whitecap School coming out to visit in grades 3 and 4, so they're already starting those relationships. When they get to grade 5, it's a smooth transition for our children. We also have a liaison office position, with a student councillor who works with the children from Whitecap, not just in the case of grade 5, but with the high school kids, to make sure that in that transition if there are any challenges they're facing, or if they need any tutoring or anything like that, they're prepared to offer that to them so that it's a successful experience. The experience to date has been awesome.

● (0940)

Mrs. Cathy McLeod: Last, what would be the next steps for you? You didn't rule out there being some value in doing some legislation. What are the next steps? If there were legislation, would that get rid of this problem you have where the bureaucrats didn't see that the language money should follow...? That would be my question.

Chief Darcy M. Bear: I think the next step is that we will certainly continue to lobby the bureaucracy, but we also probably hope to get a meeting with Minister O'Regan to talk about our partnership and the fact that, hopefully, he will give his bureaucrats direction to recognize our agreement as a regional education authority.

It's actually a regional educational authority "plus", and that's the language that is meant for the children of Whitecap, because if they're living in the community, that \$1,500 a child should follow them regardless of whether they're going to an off-reserve school that has actual language and cultural programming for our children.

That said, another challenge is the urban first nations, the children who are living in the city. How about them? When it comes to their language and culture that was taken away by the residential schools, why is there no investment on their behalf? A lot of our families who live off-reserve are not living off-reserve by choice. It's because there's no housing available on their home reserves, so they're living in the urban centres. Yet there are no culture and language dollars following their children. That's another issue that needs to be addressed.

I think our partnership is going to continue to move forward in a positive way. It's worked to date. I don't see our going in a different direction. I don't see my community members telling me, "Chief, let's pull out of this agreement; it doesn't make any sense." To date, it's made all kinds of sense. Even the purchasing power of the Saskatoon Public Schools division, whether it be for smart boards or other things—the IT supports, educational psychologists—you name it, all the second-level supports are second to none. Then if our children have any learning disabilities or challenges, if we can't deliver it in Whitecap, because of the large school division we can send our children here. For example, we have one child who has cerebral palsy. She has to go to a school here in Saskatoon that has all the services she needs. It's been a good partnership. But again, we're 20 minutes from a large urban centre.

It works for us. We're not saying this is going to work for anybody else, but certainly, it works for our community. The partnership approach, like I said, stems from a long history between the City of Saskatoon and the Whitecap Dakota nation.

Mrs. Cathy McLeod: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you so much. You gave us a very positive picture. Thank you for your time and getting up early. We appreciate it. You've provided insights on a way forward for your community. I think all of our committee members appreciate that. It will be part of the official record.

On that point, we're going to suspend now. *Meegwetch* for coming out.

We're going to suspend and we'll have our next session. Thank you very much.

● (0940)

(Pause)

● (0945)

The Chair: Good morning, to you in Sioux Lookout. It's good to see you. Welcome. We're on the traditional land of the Algonquin people here in Ottawa. We will hear from you. You have up to 10 minutes to present and then we'll have a few rounds of questions. I suggest they be five minutes each, if we can get them in, because we anticipate that we might see bells coming. We'll keep you informed and maybe we will not be truncated to a shorter time, but there are some indications that we will.

Welcome, and start any time that you're ready.

Mr. James Morris (Executive Director, Sioux Lookout First Nations Health Authority): Good morning. My name is James Morris. I'm the Executive Director of the Sioux Lookout First Nations Health Authority, based in Sioux Lookout.

Do you want to introduce yourself?

Ms. Janet Gordon (Chief Operating Officer, Sioux Lookout First Nations Health Authority): I'm Janet Gordon, the Chief Operating Officer for Sioux Lookout First Nations Health Authority. I oversee the health services delivered by our organization to the communities we work with.

Mr. James Morris: The Sioux Lookout First Nations Health Authority is a non-profit organization based in Sioux Lookout.

We provide what I call "non-medical services" to the 32 communities in northwestern Ontario. Of these communities, 28 are remote. They are accessible only by air and by winter roads in winter. They start using winter roads in early January, and they're just finishing with them now, because the weather is getting too warm.

The services we provide are primary care, mental health care, special needs care, public health care and client services. By "client services", I mean transportation and accommodation services for patients and clients who come to Sioux Lookout for services. Janet will be explaining those services in more detail. We also provide management and administration services for all physician services within the whole region.

One of the things I want to impress upon you is that all of those communities I just spoke about are scattered in an area about the size of France, in northern Ontario. The population is approximately 30,000, divided among all those communities.

Keep in mind that none of those communities have hospitals, pharmacies or children's mental health centres. All they have are nursing stations, clinics that are staffed by outside professionals. Nurses and doctors will come in.

The nurses are there year round, although I think that about 60% of all the nurses who operate in our area are agency nurses who will come in for two weeks at a time and work there. I don't know if Janet has any details on it, but it's a very expensive way of doing business.

One of the things we're going to be talking to you about is training health workers, who will be trained to focus more on the things the people really need—although the people who go in there two weeks at a time, the nurses and the doctors, can still continue to perform their professional services.

We need to find cheaper and more consistent ways of providing health care services to the people who live in the communities.

One of the things that happened in 2006 was that the chiefs from our area approved what we call the Anishinabe health plan, which is a district health plan. If any of you want copies of it, we can make that health plan available to you. That's basically what we have been following since then. It sets out a comprehensive integrated primary health care model and implementation plan. We've been slowly working on implementing that plan.

I'm glad we are here to talk about capacity-building. It is one of our greatest needs. The Canadian education system, if I might call it that, is just not fast enough for us. It's not producing trained personnel from our area who would stay in our area with this work. It's a very slow process. I was just thinking this morning that, if we were to look at the past 50 years of what that system has done to produce health care professionals, we're going to be waiting a long time to produce trained care workers from our area in sufficient numbers to really have a positive effect on the health of our people up north. I'm hoping you can look at those numbers in more detail in the work you're doing now.

• (0950)

I'm going to turn it over now to Janet, to talk to you in more detail about some of the things we have throughout our area.

Meegwetch.

Ms. Janet Gordon: In the document we submitted, we have identified some of what we have been able to implement, in terms of training for our communities, knowing that with the Anishinabe health plan, communities have identified that a homegrown strategy would support community needs and career laddering. We want to support existing community health workers, or community-based workers, not just in health, but to expand our skills and knowledge and for them to be able to stay and provide a higher level of care. Whether it's health promotion or prevention of illness, we want to match the right provider to the right service, with a good fit for our communities, and also for them to work hand in hand with professional nurses.

We certainly would like to see more nurses, physicians and other allied health workers from our communities. As you know, our communities have struggled with a lot of issues—poverty, poor infrastructure and not enough of an economic base, compounded by

a high burden of illness and other crisis situations, such as mental health and addictions. We are in the process of setting up primary health care teams, as we were able to get some resources from the Ontario government. We are still waiting to see whether that funding will continue, and we've been concentrating on recruiting those positions to provide services for our communities.

We are also in the process of developing a regional nursing strategy, which at this time is mostly delivered by the first nations and Inuit health branch. We would like to see it support retention and recruitment and have a more targeted nursing skills training program, more educational opportunities and a comprehensive mentorship program.

Compensation is a huge issue in our area, as it requires people to have a lifestyle that takes them away from their home and families a bit. We need a more comprehensive compensation package that will draw and keep people in our communities. One of the other things we are in the process of doing is encouraging young people to pursue careers in health care, and have developed some videos and posters. We're hoping to launch that by September.

We've been working with Dignitas International on building our community health workers. It's mostly targeted at diabetes. We have trained workers. We look at different models and continue to build on that model. We think the way our communities could deal with their many health issues or burdens is to have our own people trained and staying in the communities, having higher levels of skills and knowledge and being more readily available in the community—not going in and out, which is what we're doing now with a lot of health care providers.

• (0955)

We need ongoing support for things like that. We've been struggling to do this through grants and proposals that have been developed.

• (1000)

The Chair: Now we're going to move on to questions by members of Parliament.

Mr. T.J. Harvey (Tobique—Mactaquac, Lib.): The House hasn't started...?

The Chair: We have ParlVu on. If it is a bell, it will give us 15 minutes to get back to the House.

We're going to open with MP Yves Robillard. Go ahead, Yves.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yves Robillard: Thank you, Madam Chair.

We have heard many witnesses tell us that there is high turnover in health and education professionals, in particular in remote communities. Can you tell us about the effect of that turnover on the results of community health and education among the young people.

[English]

Ms. Janet Gordon: The high turnover rate of professionals in our communities affects the continuity of care. It affects the level of knowledge that people might gain if they would stay longer in the community. At times, we have seen a huge number of vacancies in our communities of nurses and physicians. We try to fill those gaps with locums, because we provide management of physician services in our communities.

[Translation]

Mr. Yves Robillard: The Sioux Lookout First Nations Health Authority conducts training programs for its communities, including a First Nations mental health first aid course, harm reduction training, and various webinar presentations.

How does the training you provide contribute to capacity building and talent retention on the reserves?

[English]

Ms. Janet Gordon: Most of our training is based on the availability of resources we have. Sometimes we use program dollars to try to support communities, and it builds their skills and knowledge. But mental health is a huge burden in a lot of our communities.

There is a high turnover, and it's not just because of the crisis situation that all of our communities are in most of the time. As an example, I think in the last 20 years we have seen over 500 suicides in the communities we serve.

[Translation]

Mr. Yves Robillard: How much time do I have left, Madam Chair?

[English]

The Chair: You have two minutes.

[Translation]

Mr. Yves Robillard: Okay.

Still on the subject of the training it provides, how does the Sioux Lookout First Nations Health Authority evaluate the success of these training initiatives at the community level?

[English]

Ms. Janet Gordon: One of the things that we've been able to do is provide training through the public health money that we have gotten, and we are in the process of doing an evaluation of that program. Part of that will be to evaluate how our training has impacted those workers we support with some of the training we were able to provide through public health.

As for whether it's in data management or in communicable disease surveillance type of training, these are all one-time types of training that we offer with the resources we've been able to secure for those three years.

Our challenges are securing ongoing funding for ongoing programs that need to exist to continue to support workers on an ongoing basis.

• (1005)

[Translation]

Mr. Yves Robillard: Thank you.

[English]

The Chair: All right, you've run out of time, Yves.

We're moving on to MP Cathy McLeod.

Mrs. Cathy McLeod: Thank you for your presentation and the very tough job you do in taking care of so many communities with the difficulties you face in getting trained personnel into the area.

I have a number of questions. First of all, I'd like to ask a quick one.

When the government legalized marijuana, it committed to giving 75% of the excise tax to the provinces, and it seemed to forget about indigenous communities across the country. That money was meant to support education and to deal with what was a significant change in policy direction.

Have you gotten any money from the provinces from their share of the excise tax, or has the federal government indicated that you will be getting any portion of those dollars so that you can do work in your communities around this very significant change in policy?

Mr. James Morris: No, we've heard nothing, and that's a political issue that would have to be dealt with by the chiefs whom we represent. We don't yet know what discussions have occurred between the chiefs and the province, nothing.

Mrs. Cathy McLeod: Thank you.

So there have been no funds redirected to you to help you provide education for the 32 communities, the youth in those 32 communities, period.

Has there been any difference in your communities since the legalization occurred, or are you seeing status quo, normal?

Mr. James Morris: It's pretty hard to tell. Nothing has really jumped out at us yet. At the present time the chiefs from our area have maintained the status quo of not allowing alcohol or drugs into the community. That's where it's at so far as I know. I've not been informed if anything has changed.

Mrs. Cathy McLeod: Thank you.

Have your communities been impacted by the opioid crisis, or have you managed to escape that very tragic situation?

Mr. James Morris: No. It's had a very devastating effect on all of our communities. Starting in 2009 the chiefs whom we represent told us that they had opioid crises in their communities, and they have been struggling with them ever since then.

Many communities have Suboxone programs and are just keeping people as stable as they can, but it's still a big problem. There is no policy or programs other than that to help these people. They are just struggling. It's having a horrific effect on our communities, especially on the children.

Mrs. Cathy McLeod: That's the only thing that has been done to date. Have you been given any support with regard to the education component, or is it strictly, here's this Narcan or Suboxone to reverse the effects?

Mr. James Morris: Health Canada has provided funds for the Suboxone programs that have gone straight to the communities. The communities are doing this on their own.

There's been very little, if any, funds made available for education, but I'll ask Janet to expand on that as well.

Ms. Janet Gordon: We've been able to do a few things, again, through the public health resources we receive. We've done training around harm reduction. We've done training of community workers around naloxone as we're able to, because we're trying to do it within our existing staff and resources.

We're trying to do things as we're able to, with the resources we're able to pull from some of the program areas.

• (1010)

Mrs. Cathy McLeod: Thank you.

Do all the health transfers go to you through Indigenous Services, and then you distribute those to communities, or is it more convoluted than that?

Mr. James Morris: No. The system that we operate more or less under the Anishinabe health plan is that if communities can do anything on their own, they do it themselves. In terms of naloxone programming, the money goes through to them. The health authority focuses on what we call regional specialized services, like providing doctors and other specialists, so that's what we tend to do.

If there is anything else that a community or a group of communities want us to do, they have to submit a background services request for it, and then we will go in and do it.

Mrs. Cathy McLeod: So—

The Chair: I'm sorry but we've run out of time.

We are moving on to MP Rachel Blaney.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you both so much for being here today with us, and for your presentation. It was very informative.

One of the things you spoke of was the slow training process and the need to have people in the community actually engaged as health care professionals. You also said that it needs to be a homegrown strategy.

Could you just talk about what the challenges are in terms of what you mean by a slow process of training and what you want to see in terms of a homegrown strategy?

Ms. Janet Gordon: In terms of education of our communities, I think a lot of our communities have to send their kids out for high school, which sometimes may not be the most appropriate way of educating the young people.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Yes.

Ms. Janet Gordon: A lot of them end up dropping out because they're homesick or the situation they're in is not good for them, so they end up not being able to continue school.

There is some video and distance education provided. Again, as we have done some training, we have found that people learn better by doing and actually seeing and having face-to-face contact with people.

Mr. James Morris: I think that training, let's say up to grade 12, using remote or distance education or—what do you call it?

Ms. Janet Gordon: It's videos.

Mr. James Morris: Video is fine. If you want to get into the more specialized form of training, we have to come up with a completely different way of doing business.

Sending people out to urban areas for training has its own problems. One of the problems that Janet mentioned is that of young people getting lonely. But also, if people do succeed in becoming professionals, they have a tendency to stay there rather than going back home to work there.

We need to train people in the communities where they'll stay.

Ms. Janet Gordon: There is that. There are also the challenge of poor infrastructure in communities, in terms of such things as housing—it is a huge issue for people to move back home—as well as workplaces.

James talked about the nursing station model that our communities still access for health care. It's not the most appropriate model now with the high population and also the high burden of illness in our communities. People can't be accommodated because of poor infrastructure.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Yes. That's a big challenge.

You spoke about a regional nursing strategy with the first nations and Inuit health branch, hoping to see that provide some of those supports for recruitment and retention. You mentioned infrastructure and housing. I assume that those are the really big ones, but how is that working, and do you see some promise in that?

• (1015)

Ms. Janet Gordon: We are just starting.

Part of it is that our communities are really cautious about taking on services as is, because it's not working now. We need increased resources. It's not only a community health nurse we need; we need nurse practitioners in our community to deal with the high chronic illness in our communities. We need home care nurses. We have some communities that get a home care nurse visit maybe once every two months. We don't have any resources for public health nurses in our communities.

The strategy needs to address all those huge gaps in nursing. Again, even if we could have as many nurses as we identify, we would have no place to accommodate them and no place for them to work. We're in a hard place.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: You're in a hard place right now.

Thank you so much for sharing that. It's really important that we hear it.

The Chair: Thank you.

The questioning now moves to Will Amos. He has very generously offered me the ability to ask a couple of questions, so we're going to share our time.

Can you tell me a little about graduation rates? How are your high school graduation rates, and how many of those young people want to enter post-secondary and move on into a medical career?

Mr. James Morris: I was recently provided with the graduation rates for our region. I didn't bring the statistics, but it's certainly much better than it used to be.

When I was counselling high school students in Thunder Bay back in the early 1990s, we would start off with 200 students. When June came around, we would have 90 to 95 students left. We were told that was good, that it was a good rate.

It has improved considerably now. We have two high schools in our area that are first nations schools: one here in Sioux Lookout and one in Thunder Bay. Those two high schools have worked to improve the success rate, but the number of people moving into post-secondary schools is still low. I don't get the impression, sitting here today, that we have a whole roomful of university or college graduates right now. They're just not there.

I know that Canadore College in North Bay has a good program. It trains a lot of health care specialists who focus on community needs. That seems to be working well.

Training young people in those things that are relevant to them and their communities is one way of attracting trainees. When you put them into a university or a college that doesn't reflect their way of life, it's not a good motivator to get people to stay in school and accomplish. Accomplish what?

The Chair: That's right.

Of the professionals you see in your community, how many are non-indigenous? What's the percentage? Are they mostly southerners, outsiders, or are they locals?

Ms. Janet Gordon: There's probably a handful of nurses from our communities, maybe five, if I were being generous.

The Chair: That's five out of how many positions?

Ms. Janet Gordon: I believe there are around 60 positions.

A voice: It might be more.

The Chair: Then we still have a long way to go.

Ms. Janet Gordon: Yes.

Out of the physicians we have in our practice, maybe three are first nations people.

The Chair: Three out of...?

Ms. Janet Gordon: The rest are mostly from the Toronto area.

• (1020)

The Chair: How many physicians would serve your regional area? You have three indigenous....

Ms. Janet Gordon: We have enough funding to recruit about 50 physicians. Some physicians chose not to work full-time or they work away or from home and will only work a quarter of the time, so we probably have about 40 physicians who work for us. When you calculate how much that is equivalent to in full-time positions, I believe it's about 22 physicians.

The Chair: Okay.

Ms. Janet Gordon: So we're not where we should be. We're trying to stretch people—

The Chair: Yes, I hear you.

Ms. Janet Gordon: —as far as we can.

The Chair: We have a bit of time for MP Will Amos, if he chooses.

Mr. William Amos (Pontiac, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

My thanks to both of our witnesses. I think your testimony and the questions asked by member Blaney make it clear that you have a really challenging set of issues, all of which compound the problems. If you don't have adequate housing, if you don't have the investments necessary on the education side, if you don't have the investments on the health side, then all of those end up creating a vicious circle. Your testimony is coming across very clearly, and I thank you for that.

I wonder, if one were to try to look as far upstream as possible towards future solutions, what is it you would need with regard to your youth and the education of your young community members to address these issues related to capacity-building going forward? It seems to me that what you're really asking for is a way of solving the root problems, so I wonder if you'd like to go in that direction and advise on what you need done to address the capacity issues from a youth perspective.

Mr. James Morris: The first problem that has to be dealt with—and the health authority itself doesn't play a key role in this—is educating the young people. We had a high school in Thunder Bay that used to accommodate about 200 students, but because of the problems that Thunder Bay has been having with students turning up dead, when I was there last spring, I learned that there were only about 60 students at the high school. That happened because parents were reluctant to send their kids to high school in Thunder Bay because of the death rate among students. I don't know who's working to improve that, but I know it's going to take some time.

One solution I've heard many people suggest is that these kids shouldn't have to leave home to go to high school. We need to find some way to provide high school education to all these kids in their own home. I don't know how that's going to be done yet. Some communities have a form of high school, but it doesn't have the same standards as the high schools in Thunder Bay. That needs to be dealt with.

Once that's done, then we need to have a policy and a program that will train these young people to do health care work that makes sense. It's not training them to be doctors the way we train normal doctors; that's too long and too difficult for them right now. We need to adapt training programs to the work needed in the communities. It may involve some things that doctors do, but not everything, because that's not what's really needed. It's better than waiting three weeks for a doctor to come in and taking a chance on whether they're going to see you or not. We need to put a lot of effort into designing programs that work for remote native communities.

I'll see if Janet has anything to offer on that.

Ms. Janet Gordon: One of the models we were looking at is the Nuka model that trains community health aides in Alaska. They don't have physicians or nurses living in their communities, but they have their own people who have been trained, and it's pretty aggressive training. At the end of it they have the skills and knowledge to provide emergency or primary care.

Those are some of the models we've been looking at to see how we can build capacity in our communities so that people feel they are safe and have access to service as quickly as possible.

One of the other things I wanted to mention is that in Saskatchewan, they have a first nations university. Models like that support people who want to go to college and university. It's hard to integrate into systems when you're just coming out of remote communities, so a more supportive environment needs to be there for people who come out of our communities.

• (1025)

The Chair: We have to move on.

Mr. William Amos: Thank you.

The Chair: Questioning now moves to Kevin Waugh.

For the information of the committee, it seems that the vote has been moved to 11:30, so we will be able to complete the full amount of time allocated.

Do we want to continue with five-minute rounds? How do members want to proceed? I've been very generous with our time.

Okay. I see one person in agreement.

MP Kevin Waugh.

Mr. Kevin Waugh: Janet and James, thank you for being here this morning.

You've both talked about suicide. Janet, you mentioned a number—500. James, you talked about the school situation.

What are we doing?

This community of Thunder Bay has been in the national news for the last two to three weeks. Obviously, no one's listening, because we haven't seen anything. Both of you have touched on this here this morning, the suicides and the attempted suicides. It's an epidemic in your area.

Where do you reach out? Obviously, there's an issue in your area.

Mr. James Morris: Yes. Actually, the suicide crisis in our area began in 1986. If you look at the statistics before that, there were suicides, but there was no pattern to them. In 1986 a pattern started to develop, beginning with young men between the ages of 15 and 21. It peaked in 2000, when we had 26 suicides in the region in one year. That's more than two suicides a month. In small communities, that has had a devastating effect.

There's no one reason why these suicides happen; there are many reasons. You have to take the environment that these kids live in together with the things that have happened to them personally to come up with some semblance of why they died. None of them can tell us: they're dead. We can only look at their backgrounds and realize that everything a reserve life represents has conspired to kill these young people. I don't know if any of you have ever lived in reservations. It's a very poor way of life. Many of these kids grow up hungry all the time. They have poor clothing. They experience a lot of family violence from the time they are little babies. Some of them just get tired. They just walk off and hang themselves. Kids do that. There's nothing; the systems that are in place are not enough to look

after all these kids adequately. Some of them just give up. They can't go on.

What are we doing about it? There is no policy and therefore no mental health program for first nations people in Canada. That's the number one problem. When I went to Ottawa back in the late eighties, when I was told we had a crisis, I was told that the federal government doesn't have a policy for mental health; the province does that. I went to the province, and they said, "Yes, we have a whole series of mental health programs—except for status Indians living on reserve." So we were nowhere.

There is still no policy for these kids who live on reserve to get mental health help. All we have is a patchwork of mental health programs from both the federal level and the province. There is no comprehensive program to deal with these suicides. That's the first thing. We have to take whatever we can, from wherever we can, to deal with this issue. There are many issues. We have had pedophiles in our region, we have poverty—you name it. These kids just can't deal with it without—

• (1030)

Mr. Kevin Waugh: I am on your website. You show 43 openings for jobs. A mental health counsellor makes \$76,767 a year. This was posted four months ago. Have you filled that position?

Mr. James Morris: No. We're still looking.

Mr. Kevin Waugh: See, here's the issue; you have 43 jobs, ranging from mental health to privacy officer. I mean, that's 43 jobs. Some of these go on for months. Like I said, this one was posted four months ago. Have you had any leads to bring people to your community?

Mr. James Morris: We are constantly looking for people to come in. First of all, we don't have our own people. I just finished telling you that because of the educational system, we don't have people from our region who can do that. We have to look everywhere. Recruiting and training professionals to come to work in a remote area is very difficult. We struggle with that. We are very lucky when we do find people who are committed to helping people.

Ms. Janet Gordon: Yes.

Mr. James Morris: We have a lot of those people, and we're very lucky to have them, but it's hard to find people like that all the time. Some people will come and stay for one month, and then they're gone.

Ms. Janet Gordon: We've tried different things. We've advertised in places like Ottawa, Toronto, Thunder Bay and Winnipeg. We've done special recruitment fairs in Toronto and Ottawa. We've been trying to be innovative in terms of recruitment.

The other thing that's a struggle is that in Sioux Lookout, for instance, housing is a huge issue. There's also the high cost of living here in terms of rent and food and whatever. Gas is probably higher than it is down south. That really deters people quite a bit.

Mr. Kevin Waugh: How many mental health counsellors do you need? I see two job openings for them listed on your website. How many do you have?

Mr. James Morris: The northern counselling agency used to have 16 counsellors who travelled into the north. Now, I think they're down to one or two.

Ms. Janet Gordon: I know. We're in a sad state.

Mr. James Morris: It's....

Ms. Janet Gordon: Yes. In the meantime, we have contracted some agencies to come to do some services for us. We were able to contract a psychology firm when we got the Jordan's principle money. We had over 300 kids on the list for a psychology referral. All we've been doing in the last year and a half is to try to assess those kids and develop some sort of a treatment plan for them, which we hadn't been able to do before that. We had funding for only a half-time psychologist before that.

Mr. James Morris: The other thing we did is establish what we call "trauma teams". These are specialized teams of highly trained professionals, but they're from the outside. We had criteria that involved native people who spoke the language and had a lot of clinical experience, but that program is coming to an end because I can't find any money to do it. That was one way of providing excellent long-term counselling services for families.

• (1035)

Mr. Kevin Waugh: Thank you.

The Chair: All right. Questioning now moves to MP Mike Bossio.

Mr. Mike Bossio: Thank you both so much for being here this morning and for sharing your experiences and the experience of the community.

I don't know if you remember that Member McLeod and I were up at Sioux Lookout and met with you as part of the youth suicide study we were doing at the time. You served us a fantastic lunch and we had a great conversation.

You were talking just now about some of the development around mental health and other areas that are starting to change, but it's been a long road. I mean, I look at you both right now and you still look very weary from the burden you've had to carry for a long period of time. I remember that during the lunch, when you were sharing your stories, half the people in the room were burnt out because of the extended hours you're constantly having to put in and the overwhelming burden that so many have in their communities. They're the only resource for the incidents of youth suicide, mental health and addictions. It just becomes overwhelming for one individual to have to carry that burden alone.

We just had another panel prior to yours, from the Saskatoon region. They had a shortage of manpower. There were skilled positions, and they had gone to one of the local colleges and said, "Look, we need to develop these skills very quickly, because we have a building boom happening, and some major projects."

I guess I'm trying, like you, to identify some solutions. It is so difficult when you have so many remote communities to get the training to those communities, but it definitely sounds like it has to happen on site. It has to be hands-on.

Has anybody explored the possibilities of an institute like the First Nations Technical Institute or some other first nations college that could actually go on site with nurses hired specifically to provide training in those communities, on an ongoing basis? They could go from community to community throughout the year to provide that on-site training, so that over a number of years—it takes awhile, but

over a number of years—you'll be able to get individuals fully trained. Are solutions like that that being considered?

Mr. James Morris: The only example I can think of is Canadore College in North Bay. They've established what they call the centre of excellence for native education. Not only do they train people on site at the college, but they're also prepared to go to the communities to train them there, if people can't come out. That's the closest I have.

In our area, there's nothing. We have an institute in Thunder Bay that does some training, but they focus on everything, not just mental health. They have one program on mental health, I would call it, that's been in operation now for maybe two years. They're just getting started.

Ms. Janet Gordon: Yes, Moose Factory has a hospital there. They did develop and had a nursing program delivered right in Moose Factory, and it was very successful. It was a diploma program, but it did graduate quite a few local people who are now nurses in their communities. It does work if we can find.... To deliver something like that certainly requires lots of resources.

Mr. Mike Bossio: Sioux Lookout has a fabulous hospital. Could something like that be a potential opportunity there? Has anyone talked to Canadore College and the Sioux Lookout hospital to see if maybe they could coordinate a program together for Sioux Lookout?

Mr. James Morris: I spent a lot of time talking to Canadore College about training mental health workers. We really need about two or three hundred mental health workers to work in the communities themselves, maybe two or three mental health workers per community, but we couldn't get it off the ground. There was just no money anywhere.

• (1040)

Ms. Janet Gordon: Yes. I know we have talked about it with Meno Ya Win Health Centre to look at how we could work together on recruitment and retention of nurses, and to look at how we can do mentorship as maybe new grads come in. We have started those discussions.

Mr. Mike Bossio: Thank you both so much for everything you do for your community. It is to be commended.

The Chair: I would like to ask a quick question.

We had Elder George Kemp from Berens River who indicated that when they became a non-stranded community with an all-weather road, the suicides stopped. Is that maybe an issue for your regions? How many stranded communities have you got, or isolated communities?

Mr. James Morris: We have 28 communities.

The Chair: You have 28.

Mr. James Morris: Now we've got one community in our region that has had a road since the late 1930s and it didn't stop anything. It increased social problems.

The Chair: All right. The questioning now is going to wrap up with MP Cathy McLeod.

Mrs. Cathy McLeod: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Out of your 32 communities, 28 of which are winter-road-only, I know it's not the answer to everything, but in how many of those communities is the broadband decent enough to accommodate telemedicine?

Ms. Janet Gordon: Most of our communities have telemedicine equipment, mostly for health in the nursing station. Sometimes it works well, and sometimes it doesn't. There are some communities east of us that have increased broadband, but I don't think it has made a huge difference. We certainly have, for our physicians, OSCAR for electronic medical records, and they are challenged with being able to go into the system many times. It depends on the community and on what is being used in the community. It depends. Sometimes it's good, but sometimes it's not so great, and we have lots of technical difficulties.

Mrs. Cathy McLeod: Okay, it sounds like good broadband is needed. Again, I know it's not the answer, but I know for things like speech pathology, there are areas that provide support. Even, to some degree, mental health counselling is becoming.... With decent connections like we're talking about here, you can establish a rapport, etc., I think that would be one area.

It was interesting, I was talking to a group called Orbis yesterday, who do eye surgery. They have prevented blindness throughout the world. They said that they have not supported indigenous communities in this county. I can connect you with them.

They even have a flying surgical plane. They have a plane that they fly in with doctors from the eye institute in Ottawa and have done phenomenal work. If you're interested at all, I can give you their connection.

They were certainly indicating that they know there are big issues in Canada in some of our northern communities and are very keen in terms of working there.

What about dental? How are things in terms of dental?

Ms. Janet Gordon: We recently did a dental report.

We have about 500 children from our communities who are born every year. At any given time, there are probably about 500 kids who are on the waiting list to go under general anaesthesia to have their dental work done, whether it's putting caps on or removing teeth. There is a guideline that if you have seven teeth that need to be worked on, that's when you need to go under general anaesthesia.

We have a dental program that is delivered from first nations and Inuit health branch. It's not based on need. Most of the work that is done is on people who are in acute pain, in crisis situations. A lot of the time it's pulling teeth and not restorative work, or any sort of cleaning. We do have dental hygienists who go up, but again, the service demands are not met by what is being provided to our communities.

● (1045)

Mrs. Cathy McLeod: Okay.

Are we still good—?

The Chair: Well, we've exceeded 10:45, so if you want to wrap up....

We've been very generous with the clock.

Mrs. Cathy McLeod: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you so much, *meegwetch*, for taking the time to be with us to explain the situation in your region and the difficulties you face.

All of your comments will be on the permanent record of the committee and Parliament.

On behalf of all of us, we want to thank you very much for taking the time. We appreciate it.

Ms. Janet Gordon: Thank you.

An hon. member: Wow, we had a meeting without bells.

The Chair: No bells.

The meeting is adjourned.

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